

SAARC

# Melancholy Voters

Deepak Gujrel reports on Nepali voters' lack of enthusiasm in electing their Parliament

NEPALIS appear to be less enthusiastic than in the past in electing their Parliament, angry as they are with successive governments for failing to help raise the quality of their lives.

The first round of elections on Monday saw a voter turnout of 55 per cent compared to 61 per cent in the last election in 1994 and 65 per cent in the country's first parliamentary election in 1991.

Ninety constituencies in 35 districts participated in Monday's round in which 977 candidates were in the fray. In the second round on May 17 Nepalis will decide the electoral fortunes of 1,247 candidates. The country has a total electorate of 13.5 million.

Though this is only the third election in the Himalayan kingdom since the introduction of multi-party parliamentary polity after a successful mass movement in 1990, there is a singular lack of voter enthusiasm.

"There is no hope of a people-oriented government after this election also," felt many other Kathmandu voters who chose not to exercise their franchise.

"Powermongers and corrupts have perverted politics and the people's interests have been put aside," said one voter.

Observers note that most political parties which have been in power at some point or the other have shied away from asking for a decisive mandate in their favour.

The ruling coalition partners, the Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), have pleaded for a simple majority, but have not been able to ask for a majority for themselves, all too aware that voters are angry with politicians in general.

"Due to their corrupt characters, they have lost moral ground to ask the people for a majority," says senior journalist Mani Raj Upadhyay.

The first round of polling passed off peacefully despite threats of disruption by Maoists. Reports from the 12 "most sensitive" constituencies in the northwestern hills, a stronghold of the Maoists, said the election passed off peacefully.

— India Abroad News Service

# For a Fresh Mandate

India is headed for its longest caretaker government, reports Liz Mathew from New Delhi

INDIA, which saw five governments in three years, may be headed for the longest rule by a caretaker government if, as is widely expected, the Election Commission (EC) decides to hold the next general election in September rather than in June-July.

The record rule by the caretaker government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpeyi, expected to be nearly six months, has sparked a debate among political leaders and constitutional experts about its status, powers and decision-making abilities. More so, as the Constitution does not provide for any caretaker government.

There have been several caretaker governments in the past — Charan Singh's government in 1979, Chandra Shekhar's in 1991 and I.K. Gujral's government in 1997. None of them was, however, in power for long and their role was mostly confined to holding till the next election was conducted.

"There is nothing to prevent the Vajpeyi government from taking decisions of long-standing import," Gujral told IANS. He pointed out that, as caretaker Prime Minister, he had held important discussions with French President Jacques Chirac on nuclear policy.

Although the Vajpeyi government can issue an ordinance in what it deems to be an emergency situation, the President can send it back not just once, as in the case of a regular government, but can also withhold his signature till the next government is in place. Where ordinances are concerned, in the case of a caretaker government, "the President is not bound by the advice of the Council of Ministers, unlike the norm," K.K. Venugopal, a Constitutional expert and leading advocate said.

The President's role as custodian of the Constitution ends as soon as the election is announced. Once that happens, the guidelines issued by the Election Commission come into play. The Commission can ask the government to withdraw decisions which it feels might sway the electorate.

The Election Commission can interfere only when there is a violation of its code of conduct. Legally also, action can be taken," Patil pointed out.

The Vajpeyi government's decision today to transfer 11 top bureaucrats — including Home (Interior) Secretary B.P. Singh — has added fuel to the debate, with Patil contending that the government "should not reshuffle the bureaucracy in such a manner that people doubt their motives. It is not good."

A way out of all such dilemmas would be for the government to take the opposition into confidence while taking decisions. "If they want to take any decisions, they have to act in a different manner. They have to consult the opposition and evolve a consensus," P.J. Kurien, chief whip of the Congress party, said.

The debate is likely to lose steam if the Election Commission schedules the general election for June or July. The issue will be quickly forgotten in the heat and dust of the summer campaign. If, however, the election is scheduled for August or September, the limits of the caretaker government's powers will be truly tested.

— India Abroad News Service

THE Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which prohibits testing of nuclear devices, and which is the most significant non-proliferation global agreement of this century, has become a deep forbidden sea for both India and Pakistan, who after having jumped into it, are now floundering to get out.

Sounds from India are that Delhi, which always had reservations on the CTBT, may not sign the Treaty before September of this year, the deadline by which the Treaty has to have signatures of all the 44 countries who have not signed it to become enforceable. Pakistan's foreign minister Sartaj Aziz has issued a statement indicating that his government too is having second thoughts about the Treaty even though Pakistani prime minister in his speech September last year in Geneva had expressed his willingness to come on CTBT board before the deadline expires.

While India's excuse for dilly-dallying on the CTBT is that it had never said openly that it would sign the Treaty by September, in case of Pakistan second thoughts are coming crowding in because of tactical and policy reasons making Islamabad's position difficult.

The Pakistani prime minister during his press conference in Washington last year explained that Pakistan's agreement to sign the CTBT was conditional upon "removal of coercive environment". And he came close to linking the signing of the CTBT with the resolution of the Kashmir issue and lifting of all sanctions against Pakistan by the United States.

This prompted Karl Inderfurth, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, to repeat the US position at a State Department. "We have no reason to believe", he said, "that the prime minister's assurance at the United Nations is any different from that made on Thursday." He thus dismissed the so-called new linkage between the CTBT, Kashmir and the lifting of the sanctions.

This appeared to cloud Pakistan's stand on the CTBT in the glut of official rhetoric about removal of coercion as a pre-condition for signing

Treaty. This slogan in the vocabulary of the Foreign Office has been repeated since at different forums and by responsible members of the Sharif government. The Prime Minister, apart from the foreign minister, the information minister, himself has of late been keenly insisting on the right kind of environment, free of coercion, for Pakistan to sign the CTBT.

But the Sharif government had to stick to this slogan because this what the prime minister said at the UN General Assembly. He had made it clear that Pakistan "is prepared to adhere to the CTBT before September 1999 Conference... However Pakistan's adherence to the Treaty was to take place only in "conditions free from coercion or pressure."

By this what was meant was that Pakistan expected that the arbitrary restrictions imposed on Pakistan by multilateral institutions would be speedily removed; that discriminatory sanctions against Pakistan would be lifted; and that the world community would give full support for a just solution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute.

For these reasons the Sharif government is still waiting to see the US Administration lift more sanctions, including those imposed under the Pressler Amendment.

However, the US seems to be approaching the issue from exactly the opposite angle. Unambiguous statements from US officials about the need for Pakistan to take further concrete measures on non-proliferation prove this. These are Washington's pre-conditions before it delivers on the lifting of the sanctions and on facilitating financial assistance package from multinational donor agencies.

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# In Sea of CTBT

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made it clear that Islamabad should not expect to be rewarded before it has signed the CTBT.

Subtle messages have been sent to Pakistan that the Clinton Administration has done all that it could for Pakistan and if Pakistan wants more sanctions lifted and more help in securing loans from the multilateral donor agencies, it will have to translate its verbal commitment on the CTBT into an actual one.

Some informed American observers are of the opinion that even after Pak-

istan has signed and ratified the CTBT many of the sanctions will remain in place. They say that these sanctions were in place for nearly a decade even on the mere suspicion of Pakistan having a nuclear device. But now that Pakistan is a declared nuclear power and the Bill Clinton Administration will face an impossible situation in Congress in trying to make a case for the total lifting of all sanctions.

If these assessments are correct then even at the end

of the CTBT tunnel Pakistan might not find the type of reward it is looking for. The crucial question now is whether the Sharif government will continue to wait for the Bill Clinton Administration to lift more sanctions and wait and see India's stand before it signs the CTBT. Or should it wait under increasing pressure and sign the CTBT in the hope of wresting more concessions from Washington in addition to the partial easing of sanctions.

If it chooses the first course of action, it runs the risk of creating tensions in its critical ties with Washington, which wants Islamabad to come on CTBT board before September 1999. If it opts for the second it loses face at home for changing a position it has been solidifying through its rhetoric and slogans.

Perhaps a middle course can be to announce a date of signing the CTBT prior to September 1999 and expect the US to make further concessions without looking towards what India is doing on the issue. But even this will be a compromise solution will entail costs for the Sharif government already under fire from the Opposition for having shown too much flexibility on the nuclear issue.

# Thimpu Joins Digital Club

Bhutan becomes the Asian nation with digital telecommunications

BHUTAN has taken a quantum leap towards modernisation, becoming the third Asian nation to have a sophisticated digital telecommunications system, even as it boasts of a new Indian-built terminal at Paro airport.

The tiny Himalayan kingdom joined Singapore and Hong Kong as the only Asian states to have a fully digital telecommunication system when the fourth and last phase of the Japanese-assisted project was formally inaugurated recently, the national newspaper *Kuensel* said.

The digital telecommunication system, taken up under the National Telecommunication Development Project, was jointly inaugurated by Lyonpo Jigme Thinley, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers who is also the Foreign Minister, and Hiroshi Hirabayashi, the Japanese Ambassador to Bhutan.

"Bhutan, until the telecommunication system as we know it today was established, was a very big country — communication between Thimpu and Yongphu meant a three-day journey. Such difficulties had caused inconveniences on the decision-making process and in many other areas, including even family affairs," said Thinley.

Today, after completion of phase four of the project, the country had advanced from relative isolation to preparedness for globalisation and cyberspace," he said, adding that it opened up vistas for telemedicine, distance education and good governance.

The Japanese envoy echoed his sentiments and said the new telecommunications project would be a catalyst in the socio-economic development of the mountainous country where topography was a challenge.

The telecommunications network comprises eight exchanges, seven remote line units (RLU) and eight digital radio concentrator systems (DRCS) among other infrastructural systems.

This kind of high technology project is something the Bhutanese should feel proud of," said Seiji Komatsu, the resident representative of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Bhutan. "Not even Japan telecom is totally digitalised," he said. The final phase of this modern telecom-

munications system covers four dzongkhags (district administrators) from Gasa in the north to Phuentsholing and Samtse in the south and was completed at a cost of two billion yen, while the entire project cost more than 5.8 billion yen.

The digital telecommunications system came a week after India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh inaugurated the new terminal building of Paro airport here. The Indian-funded project is considered yet another milestone in Indo-Bhutan cooperation.

India and Bhutan share many natural bonds which ensure close, enduring and lasting friendship for mutual benefit," Singh said. "Over the decades, we have set an example of mutually beneficial relations between two nations, however marked the disparity in sizes," he added.

He attributed this to the "enlightened leadership" of the two countries, especially praising the statesmanship and vision of Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who had also contributed to the strengthening of regional cooperation in South Asia.

Foreign Minister Thinley

praised the Airport Authority of India and the Indian Border Roads Organisation which built the terminal at a cost of Nu 217.3 million. The splendid architectural and engineering edifice was "reflective of the genius and sensitivity with which the builders have blended traditional architecture with modern engineering concepts and standards," he said.

He also outlined the history of Indo-Bhutan cooperation, emphasising the numerous projects which helped raise the quality of life of the Bhutanese people. "Where demographic, economic and territorial asymmetries could have served to constrain mutual trust and confidence, out bilateral relations have become a model for peaceful co-existence," he said.

The new airport terminal is centrally heated and has all modern amenities, including duty-free and handicraft shops, conveyerbelts, a first-aid room, x-ray machines, a restaurant, office, close circuit security system, elevator, VIP and business class lounges and a cargo area. A special ceremonial building houses a royal lounge, VIP lounge and press lounge.

— India Abroad News Service

# Warning Bells in Sri Lanka

The Provincial Council elections in Sri Lanka, along with other recent developments, could erode the ruling alliance's support base and lead to greater political turmoil ahead. Paful Bidwai writes

Kumaratunga's ruling People's Alliance (P.A.) may be running out. The warning bells now ring loud and clear.

Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the run-up to and the results of the fraught, contentious elections to five Provincial Councils (P.C.s) on April 6. The P.A. barely managed to retain the Western province, Sri Lanka's largest and richest, with a quarter of its population and 45 per cent of its GDP. It wrested the other four from the UNP which had won them in 1993 (before the P.A. was born). But the quality of its victory was at best poor, uncertain and slippery. Worse, it came amidst strong accusations of electoral malpractices, some of them backed by independent NGOs such as the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV).

Even if the rigging charges are discounted, the P.A.'s performance in the P.C.s marked a sharp decline in relation to the 1994 presidential elections and the 1997 elections to local bodies.

Compared to 62 per cent five years ago, its vote fell to just 49 per cent in 1997, and now further down to 45 per cent. This puts it barely two percentage points ahead of the rival UNP, itself unblissed by a great leadership, faction-ridden, and not free from the odium of long years of cynical misrule.

The difference in the five P.C.s between P.A. and UNP votes is only about 126,000. This would be wiped out more than twice over by the votes rendered invalid in the five P.C.s — Western, Central, North-

Central, Sabaragamuwa and Uva — as a whole, the P.A. won 120 seats, and the UNP 112. In Colombo district, the P.A.'s vote declined by a massive 44 per cent over 1994. In other urban areas such as Kandy, the UNP increased its vote share to come within a couple of percentage points of the P.A.s. In only one of the five P.C.s (North-Central) did the P.A. win an absolute majority of seats. Elsewhere, it can only form a government in alliance with other parties, some of them ideologically hostile.

The Provincial Council election results mark the erosion of the ruling People's Alliance's vote bank. The conduct of the polls came in for critical scrutiny from observers such as PAFREL (People's Action for Free and Fair Elections), MFPE (Monitoring of Free and Fair Elections) and CMEV, especially after the P.A.'s performance during the end-January elections to the North-Western (Wayamba) P.C. These were widely acknowledged to have been badly rigged, with 1,557 incidents of violence, of which 895 took place on polling day.

These acts of violence included physical assault, intimidation, threat, removal of names from electoral rolls, booth-capturing and stuffing of ballot boxes. The P.A. was held responsible for about two-thirds of these cases. Wayamba, much like Meham in Haryana, became synonymous with unconscionable electoral malpractices which affected a quarter of all polling centres.

Even the Election Commissioner was forced to admit that as many as 212 polling centres (of a total of 1,160) witnessed serious malpractices (although he, contradictorily, ordered a repoll in only nine centres).

This time around, independent monitors received over 1,300 complaints during the poll campaign. The police registered 298 complaints on polling day. But the intensity of violence was much lower than at Wayamba. The CMEV claimed that the performance of a third of all polling stations it monitored was "unsatisfactory". Even if this sample is considered unrepresentative, it amounts to five per cent of all polling stations. This may not have drastically affected the party-wise outcome of the elections, but in Sri Lanka's individual-candidate preference-vote system, each vote has a unique value and can alter candidate-wise outcomes.

It is regrettable that there should have been electoral malpractices in the Third World's first democracy, where adult suffrage goes back to the 1930s. And it is worse that the P.A. should have got into an ugly confrontation with independent election monitors, especially the CMEV, to the point of running a campaign against them in the pages of the state-owned Daily News.

Indeed, Kumaratunga personally attacked the CMEV as "a cat's paw" of foreign interests and UNP "agents" and questioned (at Kandy on April 1) the integrity and genealogy of one of its prominent members. It

could be argued that the CMEV

at times overstated the incidence of violence, that it did not carefully distinguish between minor and serious cases, and named those accused of misdemeanour without verifying the allegations. But it is malicious to claim that it represents the UNP or "foreign interests". The confrontation only lowered the P.A.'s stature and invited parallels with the "Wayamba factor", to the P.A.'s own embarrassment.

Today, the P.A. is a party

largely on the defensive. It has

lost much of its elan, most of its

ideological and extravagant